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## “The Koch Brothers Exposed” – Talking with Robert Greenwald

Social media has changed innumerable contemporary landscapes, including the arena of arts and culture. Creatives are bypassing the traditional power structures and looking for new ways to get their content out—whether in the fields of painting or filmmaking.

Blazing the trail with novel ways to approach distribution, filmmaker [Robert Greenwald](#) has forged a new model for a mashup of documentary filmmaking and political activism.

His new film, *The Koch Brothers Exposed*, examines the pervasive influence of David and Charles Koch on the American fabric of life. It covers areas as diverse as their impact on community school boards, colleges, the environment, voting rights, and think tanks. Greenwald began the film before the Occupy Wall Street movement exploded. He was eight months into conducting his own research and filming when he saw how the 1 percent was using their financial resources to promulgate their specific ideologies and economic interests.

The film supplies a familial back story on the Kochs, who Greenwald pegs as “the poster boys for the top 1 percent—using their money and their power to fuel the growing inequity in America.”

The brothers inherited their wealth from their father Fred. The elder Koch made money on oil in the USSR in the 1930s, when he was brought in by Stalin to build pipelines. He leveraged that money to develop an oil business in the United States. Fred became active in the support of right wing causes, most prominently [The John Birch Society](#).

Greenwald chooses his interviewees with an eye to getting insights into the specific areas he identifies as separate pieces of a puzzle. His outlined goal is to create a full picture of what he qualifies as the “Koch echo chamber.”

[Sen. Bernie Sanders](#) (I-VT) talks about how the Kochs are spreading “disinformation” about the need to raise the Social security retirement age to 70 via pundits from sources such as the [Cato Institute](#)—which has received 13.6 million dollars in support from the Kochs.

Sanders believes that the Kochs are working to dismember government, and points to [Americans for Prosperity](#) (with chapters in thirty-four states), as a “boots on the ground” front group for the Koch agenda. This assertion leads into the segment that illustrates the Koch drive to dismantle public education through an infiltration of school boards from the state to local level.

Greenwald shows the fight that took place in 2009 in [Wake County, North Carolina](#), when Americans for Prosperity helped to fund the two school board candidates who were behind the agenda to essentially “re-segregate” Wake County. The methodology was to change the protocol of how students were assigned to schools. The defeated candidates noted wryly, “We went to a gun fight with knives.” Two years later, after the [NAACP filed a complaint](#), the Koch-backed board members were ousted.

[Katrina vanden Heuvel](#) speaks to the issue of Koch money at the level of higher education. She notes that the Koch Family Foundations has given over 14.39 million dollars to [colleges and universities](#) in the United States, including MIT and Dartmouth. She states, “They are buying up departments and ideology...and the minds of the next generation.” With financial agreements at over 150 schools, 100,000 students are affected. vanden Heuvel maintains that grants have stipulations and strings attached, including hiring professors that disseminate the Kochian point of view.

In the arena of the environment, the Koch Brothers have earned the distinction as one of the [top ten polluters](#) in the nation. They have donated over \$500,000 to members of the [House Energy and Commerce Committee](#), in efforts to gut environmental regulations. [Van Jones](#) is on hand to observe, “They gotta do whatever they can to protect their profits.” That includes polluting a community in [Crossett, Arkansas](#), where clusters of people have died from cancer.

Politicians pushing [Voter ID laws](#), which would impact access to the ballot box, have received a \$245,550 shot in the arm from the Kochs. One million dollars has been funneled to [ALEC](#) (American Legislative Exchange Council) and their [move to suppress](#) the ballots of over 21 million people—from a cross-section of poor, minorities, students, and elders. The favored route to denial has been to demand a government photo identification. [Ben Jealous](#) of the NAACP is on camera to observe, “You start with voting rights, and it makes it easier to abridge other rights.”

The content is explosive, and Greenwald knows it. That’s why he is working to find “alternative venues” to get his documentary out to the public and break through the “gatekeepers.”

I was able to interview him by e-mail. Below is the conversation:

**The seeds of your involvement with political content began in 1976 when you directed *I Have a Dream*, a play based on the life of Martin Luther King. In television, you produced *21 Hours at Munich* and directed *The Burning Bed*, which dealt with domestic violence. On the big screen, the musical *Xanadu* seemed a departure from your path. Then you directed *Steal This Movie*, a biography of *Abbie Hoffman*, which again reflected a socio-political content. With a Peabody Award behind you, along with 25 Emmy Award nominations, you began to focus on documentaries. The first, which came out in 2002, was *Unprecedented: The 2000 Presidential Election*. Can you comment on your evolution, the progression into documentary filmmaking, and how the new media platforms have affected your trajectory?**

"New media has made it possible for filmmakers like me to get their message out. No big Hollywood studios are needed anymore to make and release a film. More and more people are watching movies and television online than going to the movie theater because of costs. This freedom gives me the opportunity to create the film I want to be seen and heard. For example, *Iraq for Sale*, a film way before its time, probably wouldn't have been made if it weren't for the new media platforms that are available."

**You grasped the concept of bypassing the gatekeepers in 2003 when you used an alternative methodology for distributing *Uncovered: The War on Iraq*. You combined film distribution and activism through your “house parties” viewings. Do you believe creatives, using new social media platforms to amplify their work, now have greater latitude in getting their work out?**

"Absolutely! Filmmakers now have the freedom to create the type of movie they want. More screenwriters, directors, and producers now have the chance to see their words on screen now that VOD and streaming outlets are available. Overall, it's a good thing for filmmaking and documentarians."

**We have seen how dissident artists in repressive societies, such as *Ai Weiwei* and *Jafar Panahi*, have frightened their government with their work and ideas. The arts are not overwhelmingly supported in the United States. Money and lack of economic equity impact the ability of creatives to produce. Candidate Obama reached out to the arts community when he was running for President, underscoring the importance of the arts in the nation's life. He pointed to the power of culture in soft diplomacy. There was even some hope that he would create a 21st century version of the *WPA Federal Art Project*. Can you share your thoughts about the role of the artist in American society—both culturally and economically?**

"Artists tend to be people of strong character and opinion. Often they are dismissed in our culture if they don't fit a certain mainstream media mold. It's a reason why filmmakers are now releasing films online. Art, in any form can invoke various emotions and actions. I think some can be frightened of the power that a simple image can invoke and that's why they tend to shy away from it. But art documents moments in our history and that image is often what many people remember of a certain time."

**What motivated you to found *Brave New Films* and *Brave New Foundation*?**

"The chance to reach and influence people in a new way. There was distribution and technology merging—creating these new opportunities. I wanted to work in this unique time."

**In your Director's Commentary for *The Koch Brothers Exposed*, you spoke about “looking for the most fruitful areas to investigate.” You covered a lot of territory. How did you decide on the final topics that were examined?**

"We originally did this film in stages, releasing short, topical segments every month. The Koch brothers clearly have a wide net they have cast over the political system, but the topics in the movie speak to the ones with the most relevance to everyday Americans. From social security, to education (of all ages) to the environment that surrounds you; the Kochs have a hand in our daily life. The topics shown in the film reflect that."

***Jeannette Catsoulis* referred to your documentaries as being “like sledgehammers of rage.” How do you respond to film critics who see your films less as documentaries and more as “manipulative propaganda?”**

"My films aren't “propaganda.” None of those critics can change the facts. Over a year of research went into this film and the facts speak for themselves."

**Part and parcel of your social media outreach includes your downloadable action guide on the *Koch Brothers Exposed* website which includes actionable**

**portals, as well as an activist agenda—from contacting elected officials to volunteering. The film is available on streaming outlets and cable video-on-demand. What are your hopes for the film and your rollout strategy?**

"I hope everybody who is interested in not only the Koch brothers, but politics in general, sees this film and heeds the call for action. Even if that action is hosting a screening at their home with their neighbors and engaging in a discussion about the Koch brothers, that small discussion can lead to big changes. The Kochs were unheard of a year ago, but through online engagement and action they have slowly been brought out of the shadows. I'm convinced once more people know of their unbridled influence, they will take action to stop them from their efforts to buy our democracy."

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zc\\_3wsLd01s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zc_3wsLd01s)